DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 069 PS 026 067

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TITLE Bangladeshi Girls' Friendships in an English Primary School Locale.
PUB DATE 1997-03-26
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Differences; Elementary Education; Ethnic Relations; *Ethnicity; *Females; Foreign Countries; *Friendship; Immigrants; Interpersonal Relationship; Peer Relationship; Sociocultural Patterns
IDENTIFIERS *Bangladeshis; England

ABSTRACT

Despite England's long history of research on children's friendships, little is known of what it is like to be or have friends or how developing conceptions of friendship become embedded in children's social lives in increasingly culturally diverse English primary schools. This study, following an extensive search of the literature, explored Bangladeshi girls' friendships in two mixed-age primary school classrooms in England. Ethnographic observations and interviews were used; interview data were characterized by terse responses and children's difficulty in providing applied examples of the expressive dimensions of their friendships. The core theme of analysis was children's enabling and constraining negotiation of friendships within their own tacitly agreed upon boundaries of space and time in the locale. Data showed that for white children, Bangladeshi girls were elusive and ephemeral. They were perceived as always moving, not lingering at a stopping point in the street. Many white children were also aware that religious and cultural constraints affected Bangladeshi girls' opportunities to play outside their own homes or yards. Bangladeshi girls' friendships were situated in domestic and inter-domestic domains and their common ethnic identities. They unwittingly "deconstructed" the street as a place where play and games are appropriate and "reconstructed" it as a locale where modifications of presences and absences is an everyday ethnic-based occurrence. The "movement" of Bangladeshi girls thus helped fuel ethnic-based friendships. (Contains 43 references.) (EV)

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Bangladeshi Girls' Friendships in an English Primary School Locale

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
of the
American Educational Research Association
Chicago, IL., March 26th., 1997.

Abstract

The study reported here examined what it is like to be and have Bangladeshi girls' friendships and how developing conceptions of friendships become embedded in two mixed Year 5 and Year 6 classes in a Church of England Local Education Authority Aided (C of E 'A') primary school in a working class neighborhood in a university town in England. A conceptually-split core theme emerged. The core theme is children's enabling and constraining negotiation of their own friendships and ethnicity within tacitly agreed upon boundaries of absences and presences, space and time, and locale. Implications for research and practice are raised.

Running head: Bangladeshi Girls' Friendships

Word Count: 4,390

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Bangladeshi Girls' Friendships in an English Primary School Locale

The long history of research on children's friendships in England provides valuable and worthwhile insights on the way that children negotiate social participation, conflict, and adult rules and authority in English primary and secondary schools (Ball, 1981; Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Pollard, 1985). Paradoxically, we know little, with few notable exceptions (for example, Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Woods, 1990), of what it is like to be or have friends or how developing conceptions of friendship become embedded in children's social lives in increasingly culturally diverse English primary schools.

Speaking to the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups of South Asian origin in Britain, Professor B. C. Parehk, a committee member, maintained that "the whole debate on problems of the education of ethnic minority children in Britain is vitiated by a series of defects" (cited in Taylor and Hegarty, 1995, foreword). The research on Bangladeshi children's social lives in primary schools is an acute defect. Two salient aspects of the relevant literature are addressed here.

One aspect is the near-absence of research on Bangladeshi children's social lives in English primary schools. Shortcomings in the extant literature on Bangladeshi children's friendships

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include the following: 1) "conspicuous absence" of empirical research on race and ethnicity, generally, in children's social lives, (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992); 2) overrepresentation of data on educational achievement as opposed to social processes (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992); 3) 'mixed' sociometric findings with evidence of own-group friendships grounded in early ethnic awareness and equally compelling data of out-group friendships in free-choice activities (Denscombe et al., 1986); 4) little research on Bangladeshi children's friendships outside of the East London borough of Tower Hamlets (Tomlinson & Hutchinson, 1990); 5) little research on South Asian children's social lives "on the doorstep of Oxbridge," with the nctable exception of Shaw's (1988) social anthropology of the Oxford Pakistani community; and 6) overrepresentation of aggregate analyses of stereotypical processes in South Asian children's social lives to the neglect of individual and small group differences (Taylor & Hegarty, 1985).

A second aspect is the concomitant absence of Bangladeshi children's own voices in the discourse on race and ethnicity. Broad-based theoretical perspectives on the cultural interpretation of belonging in terms of the structural features of nation-states and the constraints of freedom of identity formation and expression on ethnicity in Britain (see, for a summary of the literature, Ranger, Samad, and Stuart, 1996). While Eade (1992) has challenged the orthodoxy of social identities as bounded by imagined communities and called for

flexible, negotiable, and ambivalent reinterpretations of Black, Bangladeshi, Sylheti, and Muslim "other'ness," his research follows the pattern of the dominant discourse and marginalizes women and by extension children's perspectives on their own ethnicity. The duality inherent in Bhabha's (1990) interpretation of 'other'ness in terms of the "the **heimlich** pleasures of the hearth, the **unheimlich** terror of the space and race of the other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class . . . **unheimlich** terror of the space and race of the other" (p. 2) is raised here through Bangladeshi children's perspectives on their own sense of belonging and friendship.

I will argue, following Gidden's (1984), that "structure [is] the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes; [and] the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of the action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction" (p. 374). Structures are, therefore, conceptualized as constraining and enabling. The extent to which they are one or the other is often nonsynchronous or contradictory. To paraphrase Outhwaite (1996), 'toxic structures do not a heimlich make.' Through human agency we negotiate the duality of toxic structures in terms of toxin and antitoxin structural properties. Put simply, children refashion the "elaborated ideology" of ethnicity in nonsynchronous and contradictory ways in their own everyday lives.

Many definitions that attempt to tease out the parameters of children's friendships abound in the relevant literature. One of the salient challenges facing those who investigate children's friendships is not to succumb to the twinfold pitfall of homogenizing friendships within children's broader social participation experiences and marginalizing friendships within the implicit binarism of classic socialization theory. The binary approach often fails to recognize friendships as autonomous, robust, and recursive, contrasting with the dominant developmental discourse that situates the child in a perpetual state of becoming an adult. One critical weakness in the diversity of definitions that spans a range of sociometric indices (for example, reciprocated/unreciprocated choices, equal/unequal statuses, voluntary/involuntary, and friendship/popularity) derives from the failure to conceptualize the potential of social categories in the overlap of terms.

For his study of Little League baseball and preadolescent culture, Fine (1981) used a threefold conceptualization of friendship derived from mainstream sociological accounts of Mead's (1934) theory of self, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical variant, and McCall's (1970) ideas on friendships as benign cultural institutions. Fine's definition, with modifications, serves the one for the present work: 1) *Friendship-as-a staging-area-for-interaction* (where the presence of friends activates a social context for the performance of actions), 2) *Friendship-as-a-shaper-of-the-self* (where a nexus of self and role flexibility

can potentially occur), and 3) *Friendship-as-a-cultural-institution* (where children learn the processes by which social meanings are constructed, ways of knowing the expectations of others, and methods of determining their likely actions) (p. 47). In the present work the notion of friendship as "a crucible for cultural transmission" (p. 47) is extended to include the addendum "and negotiation in unique and contingent ways in particular settings" (see Deegan, 1996, p. 13). This distinction cuts to the polyvalence of friendships in children's everyday lives. This re-conceptualization attempts to situate children in pivotal positions in the construction of their own friendships.

Four responses frame the organization of the paper. First, I will discuss emergent research on friendships and ethnicity. Next, I will discuss a clutch of Gidden's (1984) postmodern concepts loosely organized with reference to a social theory of the organization of space and time. Then, I will discuss findings from a study of Bangladeshi children's friendships in an English primary school. Finally, I will raise implications for research and practice. The following set of interrogative are explored in light of the extant literature on children of South Asian origin, broadly, and, specifically, Bangladeshi children's social lives in noninstructional settings:

1) What is it like to be and have Bangladeshi girls' friendships in two mixed Year 5 and Year 6 classes in a Church of England Local Education Authority (LEA) Aided (C of E 'A') neighborhood primary school in England?

2) Why, and under what circumstances do Bangladeshi girls' friendships emerge as appealing and plausible modes of reasoning in the local setting?
3) What conditions prompt Bangladeshi girls to operationalize friendships as explanatory frameworks for day-to-day social actions? and
4) Why, and under what circumstances are Bangladeshi girls' friendships affected by particular temporal, spatial, and attitudinal factors.

Explanatory Frameworks for Ethnicity and Friendships

In their study of racism in children's social lives in majority-white primary schools in England, Troyna and Hatcher (1992) called for a theory of social relationships that has "to be able to explain both the dynamic towards equality and harmony and dominance and conflict" (p. 48). One of the critical features of their theory focuses on how children breach the gap between structure and agency through a layered model of social structures, ideologies, common-sense understandings, individual identities, and friendships. The authors note that "children draw boundaries that define micro-social structures of personal relationships that they create" (p. 48). Specifically, they argued that all children have their own model of social network which derives from a unique and contingent 'mix' of "elaborated ideologies," for example, ethnicity, "refashioned into common-sense through practical experience" (p. 49), and other elements

of common-sense, for example, "the implications of friendship for dominance and equality" (p. 49).

Closely allied to Troyna and Hatcher's (1992) social network model is McCarthy's (1990) contradictory or nonsynchronous position on race and ethnicity and schooling in the US. McCarthy (1990) argued against the limitations of Apple and Weiss's (1983) parallelist position when applied to institutional settings. Apple and Weiss (1983) argued that "the unequal processes and outcomes of teaching and learning and of schooling in general are produced by constant interactions among three dynamics (race, gender, and class) and in three spheres (economic, political, and cultural)" (p. 25). McCarthy argued that the dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and community have interactive outcomes and are systematically contradictory or nonsynchronous. These outcomes can potentially lead to an increase or decrease in the effects of race or any other variable in local school settings.

In searching for ways to inform the discourse on ethnicity, identity, and nationalism in South Africa, Wilmsen, Dubow and Sharp (1994) wrote that we need "to find a vocabulary that recognizes--possibly celebrates--forms of ethnic identification that are flexible and polyvalent rather than those that are exclusive and chauvinistic (p. 354). In similar vein, Werber (1996) trenchantly argued against efforts that attempt to essentialise [ethnicity], "to obscure the relational aspects of identity, experience or collective representations, to valorize, as it were the thing in itself, as being autonomous and separate,

cut off from ongoing relationships" (p. 71). Flexible, relational, and polyvalent conceptualizations of children's friendships and ethnicity are integral to the present work.

Social Organization of Time and Space

What is particularly missing from attempts to bridge structure and agency and schooling is a flexible conceptualization of the integrative boundaries that help to explain how the unique and contingent 'mix' of concerns, needs, abilities, and capacities that are explicated by McCarthy (1990) and Troyna and Hatcher (1993) are socially constructed in the locale of a neighborhood primary school.

One of the common elements in the schemas used in the structurationist 'school' (see Thrift, 1995) for bridging structure and agency is mediating concepts (Bhaskar, 1979). In line with a distinct strand in the writings of structurationists, Bhaskar (1979) wrote that:

> we need a system of mediating concepts . . . designating the 'slots,' as it were, in the social structure into which active subjects must slip in order to reproduce it; that is, a system of concepts designating the 'point contact' between human agency and social structures (p. 51).

A hybrid clutch of Gidden's (1984) writings on social systems as time-space constituted and binding derived from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of bodily experience, Goffman's symbolic-interactionist notions of encounters, and Heidegger's philosophy of 'presencing' are rehearsed here with Pred's (1990) capsule

definitions of 'co-presence' and 'locale' and juxtaposed with Gidden's own 'down to earth' notions of time and place:

1) Co-presence

> . . . the simultaneous physical presence of others at specific locations, or 'settings of interactions' is seen as fundamental to the conduct of social life, the implementation of institutional activities (Pred, 1990, p. 123)
>
> . . . no particular context of co-presence is entered into **de novo** , but exists in conjunction with other [now materially absent] contexts influencing current interaction (Giddens, 1987, p. 146)

2) Locale

> . . . a physically bounded area which provides a setting for institutionally embedded social encounters and practices (Pred, 1990, p. 123)
>
> [not] 'a mere stopping point' but a site-specific combination of presences and absences . . . and [they] need not be local, for they may range from a room in a house, a street-corner, the shop floor of a factory . . . (Giddens, 1985, pp. 271-271, 285)

A series of site-specific 'settings of interaction,' most notably, 'the street' are examined in terms of how Bangladeshi girls and other children are present and absent for each other in their everyday encounters and social practices in the present work.

Ethnographic Context and Data Collection Procedures

Ethnographic observations and interviews took place in a "bellwether" (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) or highly developed instance of Bangladeshi presence in two mixed Year 5 and Year 6 classes with immigrant and first-generation children from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Tanzania, and the UK. A Local Education Authority Church of England Aided School (C of E 'A'), "St. Alban's" is situated in a working class neighborhood in a small university town in a shire county. The sample included forty-nine 9-, 10-, and 11-year old pupils: 25 English (11 male; 14 female), 21 Bangladeshi (10 male; 11 female), 1 Tanzanian (female), 1 Malaysian (male), and 1 Hong Kong (female). The school was majority white. St. Alban's is a modern school building in an increasingly 'gentrified' neighborhood. The overwhelming majority fathers of the Bangladeshi girls worked in what were described as the local 'Indian' restaurants, with the notable exception of Runi's father who was an engineer. St. Alban's has a multifaith and multilingual curriculum and has the services of a Section 11 teacher. The present paper focuses on Bangladeshi girls in the broader sample.

Observations took place during half-day observation periods (alternating between morning periods defined as 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 A. M., afternoons defined as 12:00 A. M. to 3:00 P.M.), on thrice-weekly on varied days of the week, between September and November, and twice-weekly in December). These observations covered normal school and classroom activities and

noninstructional periods in the school corridors, cloakrooms, cafeteria, playground, school crossing, and bicycle shed. An observational component also tracked the children's toing and froing patterns between Churchill and Spicer Streets and St. Alban's on Shuttleworth Street. Data analysis involved searching for key and recurrent events and activities that became categories of focus for further observation and interviewing. Instances of the categories were collected to determine the diversity of dimensions under the category and were, in turn, continually analyzed for an emerging model to discover basic social processes (Spradley, 1979; 1980).

Informal interviews and interview guide approaches were used (Patton, 1980). Informal interviews were conducted throughout the study. They varied from momentary exchanges to brief conversational interludes, often occurring during transition times. Successive rounds of interviews, which usually extended 10, 15, or 20 minutes, were conducted in late September, and late November or early December. Interview topics were derived from focus topics grounded in the emerging theory. Strategies for enhancing a nonthreatening interview situation included joking about the size of the microcassette recorder, playing tapes at various speeds, and a guarantee that interviewees would have an opportunity to listen to and respond to the views that they had expressed during their interviews. All interviews took place in a corner of the assembly room, a quiet spot in the library, or a bench in the playground with both interviewer and interviewee at

the adults and children's level. All interviews were audio recorded using a voice-activated microcassettee recorder, and later transcribed.

The majority of the children had difficulty in articulating their feelings on such a complex interpersonal and sociocultural construct as friendship. In this regard Selman's (1980) study of the parallels that exist between children's awareness of friendship and their general cognitive development proved useful. Using a modified version of Selman's approach, interviews included three phases: (1) initial interviews to tap the children's reflective thoughts on their friendships, (2) further interviews to dimensionalize or "tease out" emergent features of friendships, and (3) final interviews to examine how children negotiated the parameters of their friendships. The children's interview data were characterized by terse responses and difficulty in providing applied examples of the expressive dimensions of their friendships. As a consequence, the majority of data sources were one- and two-word utterances, clausal statements, and single sentences; only a few examples of sentence clusters were recorded.

Whither the 'Heimlich' Terror of Time and Space and the Other

The core theme is children's enabling and constraining negotiation of friendships within their own tacitly agreed upon boundaries of space and time in the locale. As the analysis unfolds, it will emerge that the conceptually-split theme of enabling and constraining boundaries are the obverse of each

other. Friendships emerged as nonsynchronous and contradictory variants of ethnic-based action (Royce, 1982).

To white children, Bangladeshi girls were elusive and ephemeral. They were always moving, not lingering at 'a mere stopping point' in the street. Gordon, a white boy, from Viceroy Street explained, "they're always going somewhere" but where they were going was somewhat of a mystery for him. Jill, a white girl from the flats at the end of the street near "The Tatler and Finch" pub on Crimea Street seemed less mystified but no less aware of the private lives of the Bangladeshi children in her class.

Example 1: *Jill*

> I do not really get a chance to play with Shanaz, Runi, and Roksana because they are always inside or going out somewhere. They're going somewhere when they're outside. Always if they're outside they just walk across the road to their friends house or something.

The daily routine of Islamic and Bangla language lessons in one of the classrooms in St. Alban's that doubled as a prayer room in the evenings for Bangladeshi children is evident in Ratna's explanation of what she did with her friends after school helps explain the fullness of time and space in their daily routines, rituals, and activities.

Example 2: *Ratna*

> Well, I went to Arabic reading with my friends and teacher on Saturday, then the boys go on Sunday, as well as all times on Tuesdays and Thursdays girls go to Arabic reading. And we used to go to Bangla class on Saturday and Sunday and Friday and Monday.

Tanya, a white girl, who lived closer to Ratna, than Jill, on Spicer Street suggested that even if the Bangladeshi girls were out playing in their front gardens and back gardens, they might not always be welcome in the homes and gardens of white girls.

Example 3: *Tanya*

> I do not play with girls from Bangladeshi like Shahara, Runi, and Ratna. But I do play with them at school. Because most of the time my Mom has friends, or relatives, or something like that. I've only been in one of their actual houses once. I can't invite them now. We're decorating at the moment so they can't come around.

A few white children made sense of the importance of religion and race for the Bangladeshi children. Susie, a White girl, from Spicer Street included religion directly in her understanding of why Bangladeshi girls had special challenges in making friendships.

Example 4: *Susie*

> It is sometimes hard to make friends with children from Bangladesh I don't really know any people from there because sometimes they like to keep themselves to

themselves. Probably because of their religion. Their religion will affect them because sometimes they might have to be friends with the people that come from Bangladesh.

I observed and listened to stories about Bangladeshi girls playing in their own front and back gardens or in the gardens of other Bangladeshi girls' houses. I asked Shahara, a Bangladeshi girl from Spicer Street, if she had an opportunity to meet classmates like Tanya, Jill, and Susie, all White girls, from her own and other streets after school. Her response illustrated unequivocal acceptance of the naivete of the question, as she explained, "Well girls aren't supposed to go out that much and that's why." Among the many typical domestic chores cited by the Bangladeshi girls as routine were: "washing clothes," "preparing rice for meals," "bathing younger brothers and sisters," "tidying the house" "doing the laundry," "dusting," and "watering the plants," among other household duties and responsibilities.

Bangladeshi girls' friendships were situated in domestic and inter-domestic domains and their common ethnic identities. Their friendships were essentially voluntary acts with a clear 'trace of resemblance' (Levinas, 1987), of identification and proximity. Friendship, as Werber (1996) reminds us "isn't a given . . . it is the creation of a trace which endures" (p. 68). The locale of Crimea, Viceroy, Churchill, Spicer, and Shuttleworth Streets as places for the daily quotidian of children's play and games is a variant of the "double hermeneutic" in Gidden's terms. The

Bangladeshi girls unwitting "deconstructing" of 'the street' as a place where play and games is appropriate also contributes to a "reconstructing" of 'the street' as a locale where modifications of presences and absences is an everyday ethnic-based occurrence. The movement of Bangladeshi girls from house to house or back and forth to St. Alban's on Shuttleworth Street for Islamic in the prayer room created a set of oppositional elements where space, time, encounter, and lived identity fuelled ethnic-based friendships.

Implications for Research and Practice

Given "current tendencies in reformist curriculum and educational discourses to treat minorities as homogeneous or undifferentiated groups" (McCarthy, 1990), we need to be wary of making unwarranted generalizations about what we perceive as examples of antisocial behavior rooted in race, ethnicity, gender, class, or any other sociocultural variable. By drawing attention to the enabling and constraining features of Bangladeshi children's friendships existing theoretical frameworks can be refined in terms of what is really going in neighborhood primary schools. If our understanding is to accurately reflect how children construct their own friendships unencumbered by school polices and practices, then the whispered voices of Bangladeshi girls needs to be raised in current educational discourse. The paradoxical challenges of Bangladeshi children struggling to get along illustrates that dissonant contexts can have consonant aspects (Rosenberg, 1975. A number

of resonances exist in the present paper. After Cole's (1993) notions on 'the responsibility to respond' and Noddings (1992) starting points for organizing education around salient themes of 'caring," I argue that we should actively develop the following mutually interconnected stances: 1) firmness in our resolve about the importance of friendships, 2) development of motivational contexts for friendships, 3) relaxation of the impulse to control friendships, 4) encouragement of ways for embedding friendships in action-based classroom conversations, and 5) promotion of idea that friendship demonstrates moral strength and courage (Deegan, 1996). Simply, the 'outward and upward' trajectory of reformist approaches such as anti-racist curriculum, personal and social education, and culturally responsive pedagogy (see, for a summary of the literature, Deegan, 1996), needs to be continually renewed and developed for what matters most for children in culturally diverse classrooms and schools. Friendships lie at the heart.

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